

Littoral combat ship USS *Fort Worth* conducts routine patrols in international waters of South China Sea near Spratly Islands as People's Liberation Army Navy guided-missile frigate *Yancheng* sails close behind, May 11, 2015 (U.S. Navy/Conor Minto)



# Chinese Military Reforms

## A Pessimistic Take

By Roger Cliff

On the evening of May 21, 1941, the German battleship *Bismarck*, escorted by the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, departed the Norwegian port of Bergen, intending to conduct commerce raiding against Allied merchant shipping in the Atlantic Ocean. The *Bismarck* was the world's largest warship in operation at the time and

proved to be virtually unsinkable by naval gunfire; it ultimately absorbed more than 400 direct hits from naval guns, roughly a quarter of which were main battery rounds from other battleships, without sinking. And yet less than 6 days into its first combat mission, the *Bismarck* had nonetheless been sunk. Better armor or a more powerful armament might have made the *Bismarck* even more dangerous and difficult to sink, but would not have prevented it from being sunk. Similarly,

recent changes to the organizational structure of China's military have made clear improvements, but do nothing to address its most important weaknesses.

### Recent Changes

Over the past few months the leadership of China's military has announced several major changes to the organizational structure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). One change has been the dismantling of the four "general departments" that formerly served as both the

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headquarters of the PLA Army (PLAA) and as a joint staff for the entire military. Most joint staff-type functions have been moved to the Central Military Commission (CMC) while a separate PLAA headquarters has been created, comparable to the headquarters of the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force (formerly known as the Second Artillery Force), to oversee the PLAA. In addition, the Rocket Force has been elevated in stature from an independent branch (兵种) to a full-fledged service (军种). A new organization, the Strategic Support Force (战略保障部队), has been created and is apparently independent of the four services, although precisely how it will be organized and function are unclear as of this writing.

The other major area of organizational change has been the replacement of the former seven military region commands (军区) by five theater commands (战区). Aside from the enlarged geographic areas of responsibility, a key difference between the new theater commands and old military region commands is that the former are explicitly designed to be joint headquarters similar to the geographic combatant command headquarters of the U.S. military. Under the old system, although the commanders of the military region air forces (MRAFs) and, if applicable, PLA Navy fleets who were based in a military region were deputy commanders of the military region, the MRAFs and fleets themselves were not subordinate to the commander of the military region but rather to the headquarters of the PLA Air Force and Navy. Now each theater command has established a joint command post and, presumably, at least in a small-scale contingency, the PLA Air Force, Navy, and Rocket Force forces in a region would be under the command of the theater commander.

## Assessment

These changes have rightly been recognized as significant steps toward resolving some longstanding problems caused by the PLA's previous organizational structure, particularly in the area of "jointness." Creating a separate PLAA headquarters and moving the joint

staff functions previously performed by the general departments to the CMC eliminate the inherent institutional bias caused by having a single organization responsible for both PLA army specific and joint functions. Elevating the PLA Rocket Force to the level of a full-fledged service increases its stature and influence relative to the other services in general and helps counterbalance the PLAA dominance in particular. The creation of the Strategic Support Force may further dilute the influence of the army. And creating theater commands, in the place of collections of single-service organizations that just happen to be located in the same place, means that the PLA can now conduct truly joint operations at the theater level.

These changes have rightly been recognized as insufficient to achieve true jointness. The key remaining obstacle is continued army dominance of PLA command organizations, even if those organizations are now officially joint. Once reason for this is that even if all 300,000 troops to be eliminated from the PLA, as announced in September 2015, are members of the army, more than half of the remaining PLA personnel will still be army personnel. Thus everything else being equal, on average more than half the qualified personnel available to fill positions in joint organizations will be from the army. Continued army dominance appears to be the result of more than just the numbers of available personnel, however, as all the commanders and four of the five political commissars of the ostensibly joint theater commands are PLAA officers.<sup>1</sup>

Even if the dominance of the PLAA is gradually reduced over time, however, the PLA faces more serious challenges than a lack of jointness, and the recent organizational changes do nothing to resolve these challenges and, in some cases, make them worse.

The PLA has made significant improvements in many areas over the past two decades in an effort to transform itself into an effective, modern fighting force. These improvements have been greatest in the areas of personnel quality, weaponry, and training. Nonetheless,

fundamental flaws remain that, in a conflict, would likely prevent the PLA from effectively employing its weaponry, personnel, and training. Most crucially, the operational doctrine of the PLA is inconsistent with both its organizational culture and its organizational structure.

## Organizational Structure

Organizational theorists use several general characteristics to describe an organization's structure. One is *organizational height* (that is, the number of organizational layers between the lowest ranking person and the highest ranking person in an organization). To operate at maximum efficiency, an organization should have the smallest number of layers needed to ensure that supervisors at each level have no more direct subordinates than they can adequately manage. The optimal height of a specific organization depends on its size and the nature of its activities, but in general adding organizational layers tends to reduce efficiency. In this regard the PLA's recent structural changes do not appear to have made a significant difference. One organizational level, the general departments, was eliminated, but their functions were simply moved up to the CMC—in effect adding a layer to the CMC's chain of command—and horizontally, in the creation of the PLAA headquarters. Comparison with the U.S. military, however, suggests that the PLA's structure is not overly "tall." The PLA has roughly the same number of organizational layers between top commanders and frontline troops, even though the PLA will have roughly 50 percent more personnel than the U.S. military even after the current round of troop reductions. Thus, there does not appear to be a need for the PLA to eliminate organizational layers.

Other characteristics used to describe an organization's structure are its degrees of centralization, standardization, and horizontal integration. The type of organization that is optimal for a military in these dimensions depends on the nature of its operational doctrine. If the military's doctrine emphasizes maneuver and indirection, such as the





Marines, assigned to 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, fire M4 service rifles during exercise on flight deck of USS *Bonhomme Richard*, currently under way conducting operations in U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet area of responsibility, February 10, 2015 (U.S. Navy/Matthew Dickinson)

Israeli military and German army during the early part of World War II, then it needs an organization that is decentralized, has a low degree of standardization (that is, allows its personnel to deviate from standard practices as the situation warrants), and has a high degree of horizontal integration so that field commanders can coordinate directly with their local counterparts in other units and services without having to get approval all the way up and down their respective chains of command. But if the military has a doctrine that emphasizes direct engagement (that is, defeating an enemy through direct assaults on his main forces, such as most of the U.S. and Soviet armies during World War II), then it needs an organization that is highly centralized, has a high degree of standardization, and has a low degree of horizontal integration.

Since 1999 the PLA has had a doctrine that emphasizes indirection and

maneuver. Authoritative PLA publications advocate avoiding directly engaging an adversary's main forces and instead conducting "focal point" strikes on targets such as command and control centers, information systems, transportation hubs, and logistics systems, with the goal of rendering the adversary "blind" and "paralyzed." The transient and unpredictable nature of opportunities to attack such targets means that effectively implementing this doctrine requires an agile organization that is decentralized, has a low degree of standardization, and has a high degree of horizontal integration. By all accounts, however, the PLA has precisely the opposite type of organization. The PLA is highly centralized, with low-level officers and enlisted personnel having limited authority to make their own decisions. The PLA is highly standardized, with minimal latitude for individuals or sub-organizations to deviate from prescribed practices. And

the PLA has low levels of horizontal integration, with most personnel spending their entire careers within a single chain of command and most units having only infrequent contact with units outside their chain of command. Thus there is a fundamental incompatibility between the nature of the PLA's doctrine and its organizational structure.

The recent structural changes to the PLA have done little to alter this incompatibility. The joint command posts set up in each theater employ tens of personnel drawn from each of the services. For many of these personnel, working in the command post will be the first time they have had to work with personnel from another service. If the average term of assignment to a joint command post lasts, for instance, 3 years, then in 15 years' time there may be several thousand PLA members, mostly officers, who are experienced working with personnel from other services and branches. This will expand

their personal networks beyond their own chains of command and strengthen their ability to communicate and coordinate their actions with members of other branches and services. These will represent a tiny percentage of the several hundred thousand officers and two million members of the PLA, however, and will not address the fact that, unless current PLA personnel practices change, the vast majority of PLA members will not have experience working in, or with, another *division*, much less a unit in a different military region or service than the ones in which they have spent their entire career.

Other aspects of the recent structural changes, moreover, are designed to *increase* the centralization of the PLA, not decrease it. Abolishing the general departments and moving their functions to the CMC, although this does not change the number of organizational layers between them and the commander of the China's armed forces (President and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping), will tend to have the effect of increasing central control over these functions. In addition, the PLA has adopted a "CMC chairmanship responsibility system," under which "all significant issues in national defense and army building" will be "planned and decided by the CMC chairman," as compared to previously, when senior officers at the CMC, general departments, and military regions were allowed to make some of these decisions on their own.<sup>2</sup> The effects of this movement toward more centralized control at the upper levels of the PLA are likely to permeate down to lower levels, resulting in an organization that is even more centralized than previously. Thus the recent structural changes to the PLA have not only *not* resolved the fundamental inconsistency between its operational doctrine and its organizational structure, but they also have made the situation worse.

## Organizational Culture

The recent structural changes do not address another fundamental flaw in the PLA, which is an incompatibility between its operational doctrine and its organizational culture. Just as a military

with a doctrine that emphasizes maneuver and indirection needs an organizational structure that is decentralized, has low levels of standardization, and has high levels of horizontal integration, it needs an organizational culture that values initiative, innovation and creativity, adaptability and flexibility, and risk-taking. But these are among the qualities that are *least* valued by PLA organizational culture. The recent structural changes, moreover, the effects of which are to increase central control over the PLA, are likely to result in a further discouragement of initiative, innovation and creativity, adaptability and flexibility, and risk-taking. Thus, the recent structural changes have likely made this weakness of the PLA worse as well.

## Conclusion

The *Bismarck's* sinking resulted from a fundamental mismatch between its capabilities and those of what turned out to be the dominant platform for conducting naval warfare in 1941—the airplane. The *Bismarck* was unable to defend itself against attacks by a total of just 24 British torpedo bombers that resulted in three torpedo hits, one of which jammed the *Bismarck's* port rudder, rendering the ship unmaneuverable. Not only did the jammed rudder prevent the *Bismarck* from escaping the two British battleships and two heavy cruisers that were pursuing it, but it was also unable to return fire when they did. As a result, even though the British ships were unable to sink the *Bismarck* with gunfire, they were able to put its main armament out of action, set the entire ship aflame, and eventually sink it with torpedoes launched from close range. The recent changes to the organizational structure of the PLA will unquestionably improve its capabilities to conduct military operations, but without fundamental changes to its organizational structure and organizational culture or, alternatively, to its operational doctrine, the PLA will be unable to take full advantage of the considerable improvements it has made to its personnel, weaponry, and

training over the past two decades. This is not to say that the PLA would not be a dangerous and formidable foe for the armed forces of the United States or other nation. After all, the *Bismarck* sank a British battlecruiser and damaged a battleship before itself being sunk, but it would be a flawed giant, vulnerable to an adversary that can exploit its weaknesses. JFQ

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The fifth political commissar spent most of his career in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) before transferring to the PLA Air Force.

<sup>2</sup> See Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, Strategic Forum 294 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, April 2016), 6, available at <ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-294.pdf>.